THE GARDENS OF ALCATRAZ

For more than a century, the residents of Alcatraz created gardens to lift their spirits and soften the harshness of their environment. Families, staff, and prisoners gradually built a landscape of flowering terraces, rose gardens, greenhouses, and lawns. When the prison closed in 1963, this manicured landscape became overgrown and wild. A rich variety of ornamental plants, over 230 species, remained as evidence of the island's garden history.

In 2003, the Garden Conservancy, the Golden Gate National Parks Conservancy, and the National Park Service began a joint effort to preserve and restore the historic gardens. Volunteer crews now work with Garden Conservancy staff year-round to plant and maintain the gardens.

GARDEN SURVIVORS

Alcatraz gardeners needed tough plants that could survive with little water or care. In the 1930s, the warden’s secretary, Fred Reichel, asked the California Horticultural Society and pioneering western plant breeders for seedlings that might do well on the island. Many of the species that he imported came from the world’s other Mediterranean climates, and flourished through 40 years of neglect after the prison closed.

Today, visitors to Alcatraz find a landscape alive with fragrant old roses, fig trees, bulbs, and colorful succulents—historic examples of sustainable planting. Where historic plantings were lost, visitors now find new plants with low maintenance and water needs more appropriate to today’s conditions.

“I kept no records of my failures, for I had many—the main thing was to assure some success by trying many things and holding on to the plants which had learned that life is worth holding on to even at its bitterest.”

—Fred Reichel, Warden’s Secretary, 1934–1941

For more information or to volunteer, visit www.alcatrazgardens.org.

The garden restoration project is supported through grants and individual donations, thank you for your support.

The switchback road to the summit was blasted out of rock in the 1850s during construction of the island’s first fortifications. By the late 1800s, the road led past small gardens of the officers’ homes to a large Victorian-style rock in the 1850s during construction of the island’s first pots to beautify the approach to the prison.

In front of the water tank, look over the wall to the former site of the rose garden. When the Bureau of Prisons arrived in 1933, Fred Reichel, the new warden’s secretary, was so impressed by the army gardens that he began to maintain them himself. He raised new and lobbied for, and trained, plants in the old greenhouse families.

Inmates walked down this fenced and heavily guarded hillside on their way to work in the prison industries buildings. In the 1940s, inmate Elliott Michener used salvaged materials to build garden terraces, a greenhouse, and even a bird bath. With garbage scraps to amend the soil and seed packets from the staff, Michener and his successors created gardens for the eyes of their fellow prisoners, and for their own satisfaction.

“The visitor who comes here expects to find a barren rock, but as he strolls over it he is surprised to find roses in bloom, sweet peas, lilies, and a large variety of other flowers in all their beauty and fragrance...In this way barren wastes are converted into garden spots, and ugliness is transformed into beauty.”

West Road once ran down through a large lawn looking out to the city. This area was irrigated by water reclaimed from the cell-house showers, a system devised by the army. On the bay side, the lawn has been overgrown by a thicket of fig and other garden plants that now protect nesting waterbirds. The terraces on this side of the island were mostly built by inmate gardeners in the 1940s.

At the end of West Road, below the recreation yard, are the only gardens that most prisoners could see. Inmates walked down this fenced and heavily guarded hillside on their way to work in the prison industries buildings. In the 1940s, inmate Elliott Michener used salvaged materials to build garden terraces, a greenhouse, and even a bird bath. With garbage scraps to amend the soil and seed packets from the staff, Michener and his successors created gardens for the eyes of their fellow prisoners, and for their own satisfaction.